Liberal purposes

Goods, virtues, and diversity in the liberal state

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Introduction

I

This is a book about liberalism. Its central thesis is that the modern liberal state is best understood as energized by a distinctive ensemble of public purposes that guide liberal public policy, shape liberal justice, require the practice of liberal virtues, and rest on a liberal public culture. Liberal purposes, so conceived, define what the members of a liberal community must have in common. These purposes are the unity that undergirds liberal diversity; they provide the basis on which *e pluribus unum* ceases to be a raw and shifting balance of contending social forces and becomes instead an ethically meaningful characterization of the liberal state.

This affirmative thesis entails a triple negation. The liberal state cannot be understood along Michael Oakeshott's lines as a purposeless civil association structured by adverbial rules. Like every other form of political community, the liberal state is an enterprise association. Its distinctiveness lies not in the absence but, rather, in the content of its public purposes.[1]

Nor can the liberal state be properly understood as "neutral" in any of the senses in which that term is currently employed. Like every other political community, it embraces a view of the human good that favors certain ways of life and tilts against others.

Nor, finally, can the liberal state be understood as an arena

for the unfettered expression of "difference." In the very act of sustaining diversity, liberal unity circumscribes diversity. It could not be otherwise. No form of social life can be perfectly or equally hospitable to every human orientation.

Purposive liberalism is not, however, unresponsive to the underlying concerns that give rise to talk of civil association, of neutrality, and of difference. Liberal purposes are deliberately and doubly partial. They do not fill the total space of public action; much is left to the play of individual and collective choice. Nor do they determine the totality of individual lives; they define only what we, as citizens, must publicly affirm.

A purposive liberalism is consistent with – indeed, gives content and specificity to – the liberal distinction between public and private and the liberal commitment to individual freedom. It comes closer than any other form of human association, past or present, to accommodating human differences. It is "repressive" not in comparison with available alternatives but only in relation to unattainable fantasies of perfect liberation.

II

As I draft this introduction, liberalism is ascendant. From Warsaw to Sofia, activists talk of little save individual rights, independent judiciaries, multiparty democracies, autonomous "civil societies," and free markets. In the Soviet Union, Marxism–Leninism has been supplemented by a tacit liberalism struggling for official affirmation. Faced with demands for liberal-democratic reform, a senescent Chinese leadership can find no reply other than brute force. Throughout the West, orthodox Communist parties continue to wither, while throughout the developing world, market-oriented economies surge forward as command economies stagnate.

These developments cannot simply be accidental. One of the most attractive features of liberal democracy is the wide opportunity it affords individuals to define and lead their

lives as they see fit. Contrasts with other societies that use public instrumentalities to promulgate orthodox views, repress dissent, and assign individuals to careers only emphasize the importance of such opportunities. Few who have tasted them would willingly accept public restraint, and (as recent events throughout the Communist world demonstrate) citizens of nonliberal orders cherish the hope that their fetters will soon be removed. After three generations of indoctrination, the failure of such orders to engender compliant belief can only be regarded as stunning.

Despite this euphoric onrush of events, one may doubt that the end is in sight, either for history or for political philosophy. On the most practical level, as reformers in Central Europe and the Soviet Union are discovering, public support for liberal democracy depends on its ability to deliver ever rising levels of material affluence. This relation is hardly confined to societies newly emerging from decades of authoritarian government. We would do well to recall that the economic crisis of the 1930s contributed immeasurably to the appeal of various antiliberalisms throughout the West, and we should avoid overconfidence that our understanding of economics has progressed so far as to preclude a repetition. It would be ironic indeed if the fall of communism were swiftly followed by a crisis of capitalism.

Nor should we overlook the sources – and continuing power – of the various antipathies to liberalism expressed throughout the past two centuries: the longing for community over against "individualism," for stability and security in the face of "progress," for aristocratic excellence in opposition to democratic "leveling"; the embrace of conflict as the venue for heroic self-expression and as the antidote to boredom; contempt for the alleged greed and pettiness of everyday bourgeois existence; the quest for a deeper spirituality, typically counterposed to liberal "shallowness"; an instinctive tribalism that opposes universalism in the name of race, ethnicity, or nationalism and sustains nativist populism or authoritarianism; the resentments, fears, hatreds, and hysterias that have led – and could lead once again – to

fascism; and the instinct for cruelty and domination, rooted in human nature, and opposed to liberal mildness, equality, and respect.[2]

While it would be reckless in the extreme to lose sight of these enduring conflicts, there can be little doubt that we are now experiencing a rare liberal opportunity – a period (who knows how long it will last?) in which many of the most critical political issues will be contested within the liberal framework. It becomes, then, a matter of more than ordinary importance to strive for a better understanding of liberal strengths and limitations. I offer this book, the product of nearly a decade of reflection, as my contribution to that endeavor.

Of all the issues facing the contemporary liberal polity, one is of special concern to me here: the relationship between liberal political institutions and practices, on the one hand, and what might be called the moral culture of liberal society on the other. Although much of the argument in this book develops on the plane of theory, it was evoked not so much by theoretical puzzles as by civic experiences: of rising rates of crime, drug abuse, and family breakdown; of the near collapse of effective public education; of greed and shortsightedness run amok in public and private affairs; of a steady decline in political awareness and an equally steady rise in political cynicism; and of what I can only regard as the relentless tribalization and barbarization of American life. My guiding intuition is that the United States is in trouble because it has failed to attend to the dependence of sound politics on sound culture, and that all similarly inattentive liberal polities will eventually experience similar difficulties. My proposal is that the liberal state must become far more aware of, and far more actively involved in reproducing, the conditions necessary to its own health and perpetuation. My thesis is that the public focus on these conditions – the legitimate ground of liberal unity – is fully consistent with the historic liberal commitment to freedom and diversity.

III

It might be imagined (indeed, opponents of liberalism have typically argued) that liberal freedom would unacceptably corrode the bonds of social unity. At least since Locke, liberals have turned this argument on its head. They have insisted that civil strife is the product not of diversity but, rather, of public institutions designed to repress it. Acceptance of diversity will produce, or restore, peace; pluralism is compatible with social unity; self-determining individuals will be linked to the accommodating state by bonds of interest and conviction far stronger than a sullen obedience born of fear.

This classic liberal argument was first spawned by the religious wars of the Reformation. "Toleration" would end bloody strife, not by restoring the unity of Christendom but by acknowledging its permanent diremption. Far from being imcompatible with religious liberty, public order now required it. Indeed, argued Locke, the nature of religious faith, rightly understood, rendered public coercion of individual conscience not only damaging but futile.

Contemporary liberal theorists have dramatically expanded the scope of toleration. Thinkers such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Bruce Ackerman, and Charles Larmore insist that the state must be "neutral," not simply toward religious professions but toward all individual conceptions of the good life. Indeed, they regard this neutrality as the defining characteristic of liberal orders in contrast to the partisanship of all other regimes.

The impulse animating these thinkers is understandable. If the distinctive appeal of liberal societies is the extraordinary scope and protection they afford for individual choices, then any acceptable theory of liberalism must accommodate and justify, if not celebrate, diversity. I want to argue, however, that the current emphasis on neutrality has come at the expense of other key elements of the liberal experience. Whether we examine the intellectual and political history of

liberalism, inspect the social practices and beliefs of contemporary liberal societies, or analyze the tacit presuppositions of recent liberal theories, we discover that liberalism is in fact far from fully neutral with respect to conceptions of the good.

There are at least three reasons why the neutrality thesis cannot be sustained. First, it represents a deep misunderstanding of the Lockean argument, which embodies, and requires, consensus concerning the substance and importance of key secular goods such as the minimization of violent conflict. Liberal neutrality toward competing accounts of salvation thus cannot be extended straightforwardly to competing conceptions of the good. Second, it cannot be squared with the reality of liberal politics, which can hardly take a step without appealing to some understanding of the good. Finally, the thesis fails in its own terms: Each of its proponents tacitly relies on a more than formal and more than instrumental conception of the good to move his argument forward.

Nor could it be otherwise. As Richard Flathman has said, "If moral and political life takes its distinctive character from, if moral and political issues and disputes are about, ends and purposes, how can moral and political philosophy do other than address and attempt to resolve questions about ends and purposes?"[3]

One of the main purposes of this book is to reject the neutrality thesis and replace it with another. I shall argue that liberalism does in fact rest on a distinctive conception of the human good. This conception differs from the "perfectionism" of classical antiquity. It does not, for example, culminate in a depiction of the *summum bonum* or of the best way of life for all human beings. It is shaped as much by experiences of deprivation and evil as by images of perfection. It adumbrates a small number of basic goods held to be worthy of special attention in individual and collective deliberation. It offers considerations capable of shaping our judgment in fundamental ways, and it demarcates a capacious but nonetheless determinate sphere of public possibilities. To quote Flathman once again:

> If, or to the extent that, such a consensus [about good and bad] can be achieved and maintained, perhaps in part by giving it various institutionalized expressions and embodiments, it may be possible to contain the all but inevitable, and the all but inevitably expressed, disagreements about other questions of value within nondestructive bounds.[4]

In offering this case, I want to associate myself with a native element of American liberalism. In the Declaration of Independence we read:

> Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends [the securing of certain unalienable rights], it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

And in the Preamble to the Constitution the people institute their government "in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." The liberalism I espouse is conceived in this spirit. It is more substantive and purposive, less formal and procedural, than is the currently dominant version of liberal theory. It is committed not to neutrality but to the pursuit of those ends that give the liberal polity its distinctive appeal.

Such a conception is not incompatible, as many neutrality theorists have feared, with classic liberal commitments to freedom and individuality. These theorists have tacitly presupposed a two-value model: Either a society is neutral, or it must be restrictively partisan, even covertly perfectionist. This is much too simple. The good is a continuum, not a dichotomous choice. Some accounts are very constraining, others much more capacious. There is a vast – and vitally important – terrain between Plato and Ronald Dworkin. And therefore, there is a coherent alternative to both liberal neutrality and its communitarian critics. It is possible to argue

for a robust understanding of goods and virtues while remaining faithful to liberal insights and accomplishments. Indeed, I want to suggest, it is only on the basis of such an understanding that liberal societies can meet the challenge of forging and maintaining needed unity in the face of the centrifugal forces of diversity. *E pluribus unum* is not merely a geographical and institutional but also a cultural and moral imperative.

To begin with, the liberal conception of the *good* (or *well-being;* I use these terms more or less interchangeably) allows for a wide though not wholly unconstrained pluralism among ways of life. It assumes that individuals have special (though not wholly unerring) insight into their own good. And it is consistent with the minimization of public restraints on individuals: For liberalism, the proposition that "A knows that X is good for B" does not by itself warrant the conclusion that "A is justified in coercing B to do (or be) X."

This is not to say that the liberal conception of the good has no impact on individual and collective possibilities within liberal orders. If X is part of that conception, then the polity will probably be warranted in promoting X through public policy, and in compelling dissenting individuals to support this policy. So, for example, a liberal community may legitimately establish institutions to promote public health and require all citizens, including Christian Scientists and individuals bent on suicide, to maintain them through taxation. It does not follow, however, that a liberal community may compel these dissenters to make use of its public health facilities: Coercion for public purposes is distinguishable from coercion directed at individual ways of life.

Not only does the liberal account of the human good help define the appropriate bounds of public policy; it also undergirds the fundamental considerations on the basis of which individuals can make valid claims of distributive justice within liberal orders. To put it briefly, liberal citizens can make claims on the basis of *need* (i.e., access to certain basic goods, due to all citizens simply in their capacity as citizens); *desert,* defined as an individual's contribution to the good of

some part of the community, or to the community as a whole; and *choice*, which reflects the liberal commitment to the good of individual freedom in the domain unencumbered by claims of need, desert, or other duties.

A distinctive conception of the human good is but one of the respects in which liberalism is more substantive, and less formal-procedural, than is widely supposed. Liberalism is committed to equality, but it needs excellence. It is committed to freedom, but it needs virtue. I argue that these sets of terms are not antinomies: An undogmatic inspection of liberal beliefs and practices reveals recognizably liberal excellences and liberal virtues.

To say that liberal orders need their own excellences and virtues is not to say that they reliably generate them. On the contrary, the liberal commitment to equality can all too easily turn into the populist resentment of distinctions, and the liberal embrace of freedom can imperceptibly shift into demands for the loosening of all restraints. One of the purposes of this book is to indicate how, both in theory and in practice, these tendencies may legitimately be resisted.

In speaking of the human good, and of liberal excellences and virtues, I necessarily adopt a critical stance toward the currently fashionable skepticism on these matters. If sufficiently rigorous criteria are employed, we are of course forced to conclude that we "know" nothing. If, however, we adopt criteria appropriate to the subject matter, it turns out that we actually know a fair amount about what promotes our individual and collective well-being. There are important inferences to be drawn from the convergence of opinion, from the winnowing and testing effects of time, from the kinds of beings we are and the circumstances in which we are placed. If it is wrong to presume knowledge when we are ignorant, it is equally wrong to presume ignorance when in fact we know. Much liberal skepticism reminds me of Hegel's remark about Descartes: What initially presents itself as fear of error eventually reveals itself as fear of truth.

The struggle between hope and fear proceeds on planes other than the epistemological. As Judith Shklar has force-

fully reminded us, liberalism was born in fear – of cruelty, of bloody conflict, of arbitrary and tyrannical authority.[5] Liberal institutions are designed, therefore, to neutralize insofar as is possible the strength that would otherwise be employed to oppress the vulnerable, and to enhance to the extent feasible the ability of the weak to defend themselves. Liberal rights, and the institutions in which they may be asserted, afford the most effective bulwark against the worst abuses.

But the fact that liberalism was born in fear does not mean that it must necessarily remain there. Especially in America, the fear of tyrannical power has been enriched by the sense of vast possibility. Social ills are not "conditions" but, rather, "problems"; they need not be endured but instead can be "solved." Although such sentiments are subject to cyclical variation, it seems fair to say that American liberalism is optimistic as well as fearful, willing to invest public authority with the power to act even as it congenitally mistrusts those who wield that power.

This dualism creates a dilemma the gravity of which is in no way reduced by its familiarity. A government too weak to threaten our liberties may by that very fact be too weak to secure our rights, let alone advance our shared purposes. Conversely, a government strong enough to be effective may be difficult if not impossible to control.

This dilemma cannot be permanently solved or exorcised. At best it can be vigilantly monitored, and we may hope that temporarily aroused publics will lean against perceived excesses of both weakness and strength. The broader point is that proposals cannot be dismissed as inconsistent with liberal theory simply because they imply a strengthening of central political authority over against individuals. In each case, the risks of public power must be fairly compared with the risks of public weakness.[6]

I have already referred, more than once, to America. It is of course essential to distinguish between what is intrinsic to liberalism as such from what is characteristic of the United States as a special case of liberal thought and politics, a task

for which there exists no neat mechanical procedure. I have tried to address this difficulty in part by separating the more purely theoretical arguments from their practical applications to American history and public policy, but I am under no illusions that this constitutes an adequate response. Readers from other countries will have to judge for themselves to what extent my theoretical account of liberalism has succeeded in extricating itself from the particularities of American political culture.

Nowhere is this problem more acute than in the case of religion, because nowhere is American exceptionalism more clearly manifested. By every measure, Americans remain vastly more religious, in both ritual and belief, than are the citizens of the European liberal democracies. This means, in turn, that the question of whether the relation between liberal politics and revealed religion is one of antagonism or mutual support is of special, and more than theoretical, interest for Americans. It also means, I suggest, that the American experience provides exemplary evidence – and perhaps a unique opportunity – for the exploration of this question.

Liberalism may be said to have originated in an effort to disentangle politics and religion. It has culminated in what I see as a characteristic liberal incapacity to understand religion. This incapacity has theoretical implications, for it prevents liberals from fully comprehending what is distinctive (and partisan) in their creed. Nor is it devoid of political consequences: Policies that liberals typically defend as neutral are experienced by many religious communities as hostile. Liberals see themselves as the defenders of our constitutional faith, while many of the religiously faithful see themselves as the victims of secularist aggression.

I do not mean to suggest that this clash is in the last analysis avoidable. Indeed, it may be a shadowy representation of the most important and enduring fault-line in Western culture. But I believe that we must work harder to understand the strained relations between liberalism and religion, and do so in a manner that does not begin by privileging, or

derogating, the sentiments of either party. An important purpose of this book is to contribute to such a broadened awareness.

The clash over religion is only one instance of what I regard as a deep and pervasive rift in contemporary American political culture. Many Americans (I shall call them *liberationists*) believe that the state should refrain from coercive public judgments about what constitutes the good life for individuals. Legal, educational, and other institutions that embody preferences for or against different conceptions of the good must be reformed to eliminate "bias." The law should not prescribe a "narrow" definition of the family; the public schools should not be in the business of teaching "middle-class values"; society should relax its strictures against "victimless crimes."

Other Americans vigorously dissent. These *traditionalists* believe that certain core principles and virtues regulating individual choice are essential for the maintenance of social decency and cohesion, and they do not understand why verities that (in their view) have stood the test of time must now be set aside in the name of some vague notion of liberation. From this standpoint, there is no reason why the law cannot tilt toward arrangements that promote the reproduction of the species and the rearing of children; no reason why public schools should not teach honesty, hard work, and patriotism; no reason why judges and juries cannot express the community's sense of outrage in their imposition of criminal penalties.

For more than two decades, this disagreement has exerted a powerful influence on American politics. The conceptual distinction between traditionalists and liberationists has coincided with significant class divisions – in particular, between the working class and upscale professionals engaged in symbolic manipulation. Cultural and class divisions have been reinforced by the dynamics of party competition. Democratic activists have become increasingly liberationist, whereas Republicans have become increasingly traditional-

ist. The presidential election of 1988 bore witness to the continuing power of this cleavage.[7]

There are signs, however, of increasing ambivalence among both parties to the dispute. Many liberationists are troubled by an apparent breakdown of public order and the evident difficulty of rearing children in an environment that undermines parental discipline. (I would bet that most purchasers of *The Closing of the American Mind* were worried parents and aging baby-boomers, not blue-collar workers and religious fundamentalists.) For their part, many traditionalists are not as confident as they once were that the coercive power of the state should be fully deployed on behalf of what is morally correct. (This is not to say that they have changed their minds about the content of morality.) For example, the Supreme Court's *Webster* decision seems to have sparked considerable soul-searching among the more moderate opponents of abortion, many of whom are apparently moved by the "Who decides?" counteroffensive of the prochoice movement.

The perplexity at the heart of contemporary American culture, then, is this. On the one hand, many feel that we cannot be a well-ordered polity without some limits – some line between good and bad, permitted and forbidden – and that these limits cannot be effective without some kind of public endorsement. On the other hand, our long-standing antipathy toward central political authority causes us to suspect that the state will become dangerous if it is allowed to step unto a morally tutelary, let alone morally coercive, role. It is my thesis that an appropriate understanding of liberal virtues, excellences, and equality can reduce this tension. But I do not pretend that it can be altogether dissolved.

The foregoing observations only reinforce the note of methodological caution earlier introduced. What holds true of America may not be wholly shared by the political cultures of other liberal democracies. Moreover, it ought not be assumed that everything characteristically American can be regarded as liberal. Core American convictions may well be a

complex alloy of liberalism and other traditions, such as Protestant Christianity and civic humanism. It will remain a question throughout this book whether the tensions I explore are wholly within liberalism, or between liberalism and other sources of moral authority as well.

However this may be, from beginning to end I shall be forced to engage in cultural interpretation, a task that compels me to confront a pervasive methodological debate within contemporary liberal thought. Some theorists argue that the central task is what might be called *deep description:* the elucidation of basic structures of moral belief within our political culture. This is typically (though not invariably) linked to a fashionable brand of pragmatism, which maintains that the process of justifying belief is (nothing but) tracing it to, placing it within, such cultural structures. Other theorists contend that we must engage in *wide justification* – that is, the traditional philosophical effort to scrutinize the premises of a political culture in light of (the possibility of) transcultural standards.

I argue in Chapter 2 that the wide justifiers have the better case. (I also believe that much of what liberal societies think and do can meet the test of wide justification, but that is a different story.) This does not mean, however, that deep description is trivial or irrelevant. On the contrary, the Socratic practice of moral and political philosophy I espouse takes community belief as its necessary point of departure and progresses by exploring, and trying to overcome, the incompletenesses and contradictions embedded in all such belief. The insights on which wide justification depends can be located only along this dialectical path. So it becomes a matter of considerable importance to do deep description well.

In executing this task, the cultural interpreter is eventually compelled to invoke "what we believe." But who is the "we"? Obviously it is fatuous to suggest that any society can be unanimous about anything. But it is nevertheless possible to identify central tendencies: strong and enduring aggregations of belief that substantially define a political culture,

and against which alternative views must contend. Louis Hartz did something like this for the broad sweep of American history; Robert Lane, Jennifer Hochschild, and others have carried the task forward within the canons of contemporary empirical inquiry.[8] (I might add that my own direct involvement in qualitative assessments of public opinion has only strengthened my belief in the existence, and importance, of central tendencies.)

Every political culture, I would surmise, has its own distinctive core. In every society, moreover, such dominant views are generally taken as valid benchmarks for public policy, with the proviso that liberal societies typically make special efforts to reduce the costs to dissenting individuals of disagreement with these benchmarks. It would not be farfetched, in my view, to interpret the past generation of American history as a series of attempts to minimize such costs through ever widening legitimations of difference.

At some point, every political theorist comes face to face with the challenge of significance. Suppose, arguendo, that the thesis I advance in this book is correct; what difference would it make? I offer, in the form of promissory notes, three answers. First, this thesis provides a more morally and humanly attractive account of liberalism, an account that can relieve many thoughtful individuals of the need they now feel to choose between liberal principles and their own moral experience. Second, it contributes to a more usable self-understanding by providing a more explicit account of the judgments and practices characteristic of liberal societies. Third, it provides a better basis for liberal public policy. Not only does it enable us to characterize with greater confidence the zone and course of legitimate public action; it also makes possible a greater degree of accommodation among divergent forces within liberal societies.

In this connection, I should note a parallel (which I discuss in detail later) between developments on the theoretical and practical planes. In the past generation, I suggest, important forces within both American academia and public life have embraced understandings of liberalism perceived, with some